

«For our single Ukraine»: hard pre-election blocking

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Nowadays, with the election campaign in process de facto and the official start expected to be announced soon, on January 1, 2002, the would-be political blocks are becoming more visible in the unclear political environment. Each of the major blocks has its own peculiarities that make watching them perform in the political kitchen more awarding.

The political harvesters do not differ much in terms of ideology and/or messages and platforms. In any of the blocks the key role is played by the human factor, and the theme of political personalities dominates the debate both within and outside the blocks.

One of the most widely commented on political formations has a bright leader who is seen as a spindle, with a rather indefinite political system rotating around. The formation has managed to secure some favorable treatment by the top-ranking nomenclature, which suggests that its prospects for further development are not bad. The formation is widely known as the «Nasha Ukraina», an effort of Victor Yushchenko backed by the two Rukhs, the Party of Reforms and Order (Victor Pynzenyk), the Congress of Ukrainian Nationalists, a number of NGOs and Petro Poroshenko's Solidarnist party.

Actually, in early October Victor Yushchenko spoke about almost 20 parties that would join «Nasha Ukraina» and about 30 friendly NGOs. In early November it was announced that 17 parties had submitted formal applications to join the Nasha Ukraina, and seven more Parties had been negotiating with leaders of political forces that already belonged to the block. However, the wish for political consolidation, expressed in figures, contain the risk of compromising the quality of a would-be alliance – the quality expressed in strength and/or public appeal of specific political personalities that belong to specific formations.

The process of shaping Nasha Ukraina has had both achievements and failures. Nowadays many of its components remain unclear: from the final version of the composition of the block to specific program foundations. Meanwhile, voters are waiting for adequate answers.

At the beginning of October Victor Yushchenko announced that his block would be formed by the Solidarity, the Peasants' Democratic Party, the Liberals and the Christian Democratic Union. Later on, the Liberals, led by the head of the Sumy regional state administration Volodymyr Shcherban, opted for closer cooperation with the competitor to Nasha Ukraina, the block «For the Single Ukraine».

Another recent «acquisition» of the Nasha Ukraina is the Republican Christian party. Some time ago the party's council, attended by Mr. Yushchenko himself, approved the decision of the party's central decision-making body to join the block.

At the end of October, the Nasha Ukraina was joined by the «Vpered Ukraini!» led by former Vice Speaker Victor Musiyaka. On October 20, the party's 2nd congress approved the proposal of Victor Yushchenko to join the block, and the formal agreement was signed on October 24.

The Nasha Ukraina block has been rather successful in attracting youth organizations. On October 6, leaders of 26 youth divisions of political parties and youth NGOs approved a declaration on the establishment of a youth coalition «Nasha Ukraina». Presently the coalition includes two Rukh organizations, the Association of Ukrainian Youth, the Ukrainian Students' Union, the Youth Nationalist Congress, the Youth Party of Ukraine, the Association of Agrarian Youth, the Christian Democratic Youth, the Peasant Youth League, the Crimean Tatar Youth Center, the Republican Christian Youth and others.

Meanwhile, the time is too short for empty political declarations, and political parties have to make up their mind regarding positioning themselves. However, it is still hard to imagine how the election lists of blocks will be made and what principles the bargaining over the «quota» of positions in the list will

follow. Currently the representation on the party lists is a matter of heated debate. Though, Victor Yushchenko has publicly stated that he sees no problem in the situation: «there is no problem in the block regarding the distribution of votes. Nowadays, there is normal work on developing approaches to formation of quotas. The council of leaders of the block has not considered any scenario that would involve allocation of some percentage of quotas to specific forces. Information about some sort of quotas comes from sources that are not always friendly to our block» (Vysoky Zamok, November 3, 2001).

Meanwhile, formation of the list and distribution of quotas should take into account the fact that some political parties that are members of the block already have certain commitments to their other partners. For instance, the Rukh signed a joint statement on cooperation in the election process with the Crimean Tatar Medjlis. Hence, speculating about the future configuration of the block is a hard thing: the block's agenda still includes the issues that have been dealt with in summer: the election list, the joint programme and message, principles of interaction of specific parties within the block. Obviously, cooperation within the block is not just agreement to support a single leader and to issue common declarations, but steady day-by-day work that is evidently missing.

In addition to the so-called «national-democratic» parties, Nasha Ukraina will include other political formations, like the Solidarnist led by a politician with successful business background Petro Poroshenko, which does not match perfectly the general «national democratic» chorus and has a rather vague ideological platform. The attempt to create a broad inclusive coalition has its minuses... Critics of Mr. Poroshenko's business-like approach within the block are tempted to brand him as «minor oligarch». Recently, leader of the Ukrainian Republican Party (a party that belongs to another block, Yulia Tymoshenko's National Salvation Forum, Levko Lukianenko argued that Petro Poroshenko's and president Kuchma's official representative in the parliament Roman Bezsmertnyi's participation in Nasha Ukraina may damage the block's image in the eyes of the opposition national-democratic forces due to the two men's close ties with the presidential administration. Apparently, the involvement of the politicians, close to the presidential administration, as top decision-makers of the block cause certain discomfort among Nasha Ukraina's national democratic recruits.

In the Ukrainian election process, agendas, political platforms and ideologies are not the determining factors of political preferences. Much depends on the so-called human factor. Therefore, the readiness of the top personalities of Nasha Ukraina to welcome some known political personalities is interpreted by many of their colleagues and observers as efforts to secure support of the presidential administration for the forthcoming race.

During his recent visit to the USA, Victor Yushchenko (accompanied by his chief of the election staff Petro Poroshenko) announced that the Nasha Ukraina block would «build its position with regard the President of Ukraine only constructively» (UNIAN, November 9, 2001). That will be «politics «for», because, in Yushchenko's view, «radicalism and tough opposition will not contribute to consolidation of the society and unification of democratic political forces in the future parliament». That determined «constructivism» was rewarded with a presumably honorary (though controversial) mission Yushchenko performed at the request of President Kuchma: to deliver letters from the head of the Ukrainian state to the official Washington. «[I] have passed on everything,» Yushchenko said upon returning to Ukraine, «we have shown respect for the steps made by the American government regarding providing support for Ukraine in the international arena» (Ukraina Moloda, November 10, 2001).

The honorary mission of the mailman, which probably was expected to serve for symbolic legitimization of something, may be also seen as a signal that Yushchenko is looking for ways to get a share of the notorious «administrative resource». The efforts, apparently, are strengthened by the inclusion of Roman Bezsmertnyi as the block's political coordinator. Victor Yushchenko himself is annoyed when asked about his relations with Poroshenko and Bezsmertnyi; he argues that he trusts both «the first and the second person» and stresses that «the address of the project of the Nasha Ukraina block is not the Bankova or the Hrushevs'koho streets [i.e., the addresses of the presidential administration and the Cabinet of Ministers, respectively], but he St. Sophia, where the block's staff is based» (Vysoky Zamok, November 3, 2001). However, the questions and doubts remain. Is that the effort to be above any prejudice and promote «consolidation of our democratic ranks» or the search for support by the executive establishment? When at the end of October it was finally announced that Roman Bezsmertnyi had joined the block, Victor Yushchenko stated that Bezsmertnyi had been given

[the most difficult issue – the issue of political consolidation» (UNIAN, October 20, 2001). According to Yushchenko, for a country in which «the political market has been formed of 119 political parties that previously have developed themselves only autonomously, the theme of political consolidation is the theme of more than one year.» However, nothing has been said explicitly as to whom the Nasha Ukraina will be «consolidated» with. The subjects of «political consolidation», presumably, will show themselves in a while. The matter is not limited to joint declarations, but reaching agreement about nomination of candidates for the majoritarian constituencies and agreement about interaction in the elections to subnational councils.

Presumably, Roman Bezsmertnyi can act as a link between Nasha Ukraina and another election block that also refers to «Ukraine» in its title: «For the Single Ukraine», built of the Trudova Ukraina, the Agrarians, the People's Democratic Party (PDP) and the Party of the Regions. That formation's problems differ from those of Nasha Ukraina. Specifically, the block has too many leaders. Although there have been numerous declarations that the political forces of the block will take part in the race only together, the leaders of individual parties so far have failed to agree on a single leader of that election formation. As a result, notwithstanding demonstrations of friendship and partnership between the leaders, the block still lacks its own face that would be remembered by voters.

At some point Roman Bezsmertnyi argued that the two blocks could cooperate in different formats, though no official comments to that end have been made. Remarkably, when joining the Nasha Ukraina block Roman Bezsmertnyi argued that the two blocks are strategic partners and announced he was going to propose that they «sign a number of agreements on cooperation and, possibly, even on unification. He also noted that he saw no subjective factors that would prevent the two blocks from close cooperation» (Den, October 23, 2001). The problem of scarcity of electoral space has to be addressed in different formats, from selective «friendship» with specific personalities to, possibly, the feast of general blocking. For instance, at the end of October Roman Bezsmertnyi announced that he was «considering the prospects» for cooperation between the People's Democratic Party and Nasha Ukraina, as «there are certain difficulties in the establishment of the block [For the Single Ukraine]» (Den, October 23, 2001). Yet, it is hard to say how well such plans can be implemented – particularly given the fact that Bezsmertnyi officially left the PDP in which he was one of the «brains» for almost five years. «That is not a one-day decision, for I became the political coordinator of the Nasha Ukraina block before,» he explained {Den, October 9, 2001}.

So far negotiation processes between members of the two blocks involved individual parties or politicians, but not the blocks themselves – except the summer-time initiatives of Speaker Ivan Plushch to convince Victor Yushchenko to become the leader of a block formed of the Trudova Ukraina, the PDP and the Agrarians. The recent negotiation processes have taken place in a somewhat different format. For instance, at the beginning of October Yushchenko announced he discussed possible cooperation with leader of the Regions of Ukraine party (and notorious head of the State Taxation Administration) Mykola Azarov. The format of such cooperation would not have to be limited to a merger of the political forces or participation in a single block, but could involve coordination of actions in majoritarian constituencies. However, Victor Yushchenko is not the only politician inclined to explore possibilities of separate negotiations with political competitors. For instance, leader of the Rukh Hennady Udovenko unequivocally stated: «we also had negotiations with the Agrarian party. I am a supporter of blocking with that political structure, for it has great authority in Western Ukraine. We together – the two Rukhs, the PRP [i.e., the Party of Reforms and Order], the CUN [i.e., the Congress of Ukrainian Nationalists] and the Agrarian party could form a powerful force there. Victor Andriyovych [Yushchenko], independently, arrived to the idea that it was worth having negotiations with the agrarians. The blocking did not work out» (Ukraina Moloda, October 10, 2001). However, it appears that hopes for broader blocking are not going to be brought into practice – at least that is an impression created by public statement made by some politicians that are members of the block «For the Single Ukraine». On November 3, for instance, leader of the PDP Valery Pustovoitenko, self-appointed de facto administrator of the block, announced that «For the Single Ukraine» would not seek to expand and would consist of only four parties. While he agreed that it would be good to have a «broader» block, «but if before the elections someone wants to join to use the resource, I do not accept that» (UNIAN, November 3, 2001). No comments as to the nature of that «resource» were made, so whether or not Valery Pustovoitenko meant the «administrative resource» remained unknown. Meanwhile, the access to the «administrative resource» is seen as a source of strength of the block. Nasha Ukraina, presumably, will also be able to get its share of the «administrative resource» for the election period. Hence, the parties and blocks will soon approach the period of making final decisions

at their official congresses, which, without sensations, will clear the presently murky political environment and show real political configurations – and, therefore, will allow judgment about the composition of the future parliament. The parliament that Ukraine will have for the next four years and that will serve as a starting point for the 2004 presidential race.